

COMMON BIRDS OF THE DARWIN SUBURBS

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Despite the continuing expansion of the urban area and the damage to woodland caused by Cyclone Tracy in 1974, there is still a large number of bird species to be found regularly in the Darwin area. Since the start of European occupation in 1869, 262 species have been reliably recorded within a twenty kilometre radius of the General Post Office, excluding Cox Peninsula with the west side of the harbour. However, many of these species are occasional or seasonal visitors.

This account covers sixty species occurring regularly in suburban Darwin and are those most likely to be seen by the casual observer. Rare sea-birds, occurring as beach-washed vagrants and the non-breeding but plentiful shore-birds such as waders and terns are omitted. The species included are generally the commonest and those found most closely in association with man; together they provide an introduction to Darwin's bird-life.

The distribution and abundance of Darwin's birds depends largely on trees used as sign-posts, nest-sites, feeding places and refuges. Consequently the variety and number of birds is greater in longer established suburbs such as Nightcliff and Fannie Bay and less in newer developments such as Wulagi and Anula. Nightcliff and Fannie Bay also have relics of the original monsoon-forest that covered the area (for instance, mature banyan trees *Ficus virens*) and attract species like the Torres Strait Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa* and the Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*. Most of the northern suburbs from Alawa, Jingili, Moil and through to the new subdivisions of Wulagi and Anula were formerly clothed in open forest dominated by *Eucalyptus tetradonta* and *E. miniata* and at present support birds characteristic of this habitat such as the Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis*. In some coastal areas, bird diversity may be influenced by mangrove communities from which species like the Red-headed Honeyeater *Myzomela erythrocephala* may overspill into suburban gardens.

As regards the gardens themselves, those with native plants usually attract more species than those with mainly introduced trees and shrubs. Plants such as crotons [*Codiaeum*] may be attractive to the human eye but seem to hold little appeal for small nectar or insect-eating birds. Other factors, such as the presence of cats or the lavish misuse of pesticides will also have their effects.

List of Species

Straw-necked Ibis [*Threskiornis spinicollis*] A large, distinctive species. Mainly a dry season visitor, especially to watered artificial grasslands such as

ovals, golf-courses and suburban lawns and verges. Non-breeding birds lack the straw-coloured plumes and immatures apparently have a brownish head and neck. Apparently dependent to some extent on local abundance of grasshoppers and locusts. (Storr 1977).

Magpie Goose [*Anseranas semipalmata*] Builds up into large flocks at the end of the dry season, often in thousands in the Leanyer swamp area. Small parties sometimes come close to the city near the Botanical Gardens or are seen in flight overhead. Its future in the Darwin area is threatened by urban expansion, uncontrolled shooting and the threatened drainage of Leanyer swamp.

Burdekin Duck [*Tadorna radjah*] This conspicuous black and white duck is most commonly seen close to the built-up area and breeds regularly within the twenty kilometre radius.

Black-shouldered Kite [*Elanus notatus*] An elegant small hawk, visiting suburban fringes, especially where there is rough grassland, in the dry season. Confusion possible with the vagrant Letter-winged Kite [*E. scriptus*] which invaded the Top End during the 1977 dry season.

Brahminy Kite [*Haliastur indus*] A coastal hawk; adult with distinctive chestnut and white plumage. Usually seen in the coastal suburbs, Nightcliff, Rapid Creek, Fannie Bay, and the city and Stuart Park areas. Has recently bred in the city area (P. Rowen, Pers. Comm.). Also occurs in the Gove area.

Whistling Kite [*Haliastur sphenurus*] Common; often found near fresh water and occurring in mixed flocks with the next species. Has bred on the fringes of the suburbs.

Black (Fork-tailed) Kite [*Milvus migrans*] One of the most familiar birds of Darwin, occurring in large and apparently increasing numbers in the dry season, especially around Leanyer dump where flocks of 2000 plus are not uncommon and in the Berrimah area. Widespread over all suburban areas and hawking for insects along highways when grass is burnt-off early in the dry season. Appears to suffer high mortality from accidents, especially on roads, and disease. Leaves Darwin during the wettest months, from about January to April. Also common inland, especially around Katherine. A successful commensal of man, it is widespread in Asia and southern Europe.

Brown Falcon [*Falco berigora*] and Nankeen Kestrel [*Falco cenchroides*] are two species of falcon,



White Bellied Cuckoo Shrike

sometimes visiting suburban fringes, mainly during the dry season.



Whistling Kite

Masked Plover [*Vanellus miles miles*] Quite common around the fringes of Darwin, sometimes heard near water at night or seen feeding near Mindil Beach or the Botanical Gardens. Breeds close to the northern suburbs at the end of the wet season but is apparently not as much at ease with man as its close relative in southern Australia, the Spur-winged Plover [*V.M. novaehollandiae*]

Little Whimbrel [*Numenius minutus*] The traditional herald of the Darwin wet season, usually arriving in the mid-September (not on the same day each year, in spite of the popular myth to the contrary!) and leaving late December or early January. Especially common on well-watered ovals or lawns, at the airport, natural non-saline swamps at Leanyer and Holmes Jungle. The name Whimbrel originates from the call of a related coastal species, simply called whimbrel, [*Numenius phaeopus*] which occurs on the coasts around Darwin.

Australian Pratincole [*Stiltia isabellae*] A regular dry-season visitor in erratic numbers. Most often seen on ovals. Unusually scarce in the 1977 dry season.

Torres Strait Pigeon [*Ducula spilorrhoa*] A large pigeon, apparently a trans-Arafuran migrant, arriving in Darwin from New Guinea from July onwards and breeding where suitable trees are available. Favours large banyans in Nightcliff but occurs in other woodland habitats including mangroves.

Peaceful Dove [*Geopelia striata*] Common dove around the fringes of Darwin in a variety of wooded habitats including mangroves. Occurs sparingly in the suburbs and even the city where cover is plentiful.

Bar-shouldered Dove [*Geopelia humeralis*] Also common on the fringes of the built-up area and in mangroves but seems more wary than the previous species.

Red-tailed Black Cockatoo [*Calyptorhynchus magnificus*] A dry season visitor, which can be very conspicuous in small flocks, often flying over the suburbs in early morning or evening between roosts and feeding-grounds. Only the adult male has the bright red patches on the tail; birds with yellowish patches are adult female or immatures of either sex.

Galah [*Cacatua roseicapilla*] Not especially common around Darwin itself and at present mainly a dry season visitor but there are some signs that it has increased in the suburbs since the cyclone, possibly because thinning out of the trees has created a more suitable habitat. Fairly regular throughout the 1977 dry season in the Lee Point Road area.

White Cockatoo (Sulphur-crest) [*Cacatua galerita*] Fairly frequent visitor to well-wooded suburbs but also on the fringes of the development around Wulagi.

Red-collared Lorikeet [*Trichoglossus haematodus*] The common parrot of suburban Darwin, occurring in most areas but especially where there are mature eucalypts. Numbers erratic, depending on the tree-blossom (Eucalyptus and Melaleuca) that provides the nectar on which they feed. Before cyclone Tracy, there was a large roost in Alawa, numbering several hundred birds.

Red-winged Parrot [*Aprosmictus erythropterus*] Quite common in wooded fringes around Darwin and frequently visits suburbs.

Koel [*Eudynamis scolopacea*] A wet-season visitor, this species is a parasitic cuckoo laying its eggs in the nests of other birds especially friarbirds. More often heard than seen, especially in the evenings, early mornings or at night, from the thick cover of banyans. Has loud "coo-ee" call, often rising in pitch and sounding more hysterical. Seems to be noisiest in November.

Pheasant Coucal [*Centropus phasianinus*] A non-parasitic cuckoo; quite common on the fringes of Darwin where there is rough grassland and edges of woodland, in the Fannie Bay area, around Lee Point Rd. and elsewhere. Apparently scarce in the dry season but very noisy at the beginning of the wet.

Blue-winged Kookaburra [*Dacelo leachii*] Common where there are mature eucalypts, venturing into the suburbs and becoming tame enough to feed from the hand (D. Grey, Pers. Comm.) Very noisy at dawn and dusk. Breeding September to December (Storr, 1977) in holes in old trees.

Sacred Kingfisher [*Halcyon sancta*] The commonest small kingfisher in the suburbs, sometimes picked up after flying into glass or following misadventures with cats. Perches quite freely on power-line and sometimes buildings. Two other small kingfishers also occur in the suburbs or on the fringes:

The Red-backed [*Halcyon pyrrhopygia*] is mainly a dry season visitor and the forest [*H. macleayi*] seems to prefer Melaleuca (paperbark) swamps.

Rainbowbird [*Merops ornatus*] One of the most attractive birds of the Darwin suburbs, most common during the dry season. Has adapted to living alongside man, using power-lines as vantage-points from which to sally after flying insects, especially the dragonflies that are common early in the dry season. Sometimes roosts communally in the suburbs, for instance, Rapid Creek in 1976-7 or can be seen flying over to roost in the early evening.

Dollarbird [*Eurystomus orientalis*] Conspicuous bird, visiting suburban fringes during the wet season. Using power-lines as "bases" for display-flights and feeding sallies.

Tree Martin [*Cecropis nigricans*] The common member of the swallow family [*Hirundinidae*] in the Darwin area, especially near water, but scarce during the wettest months when it possibly moves out to breed. Large flocks occur around the Sanderson sewage ponds and birds are frequently seen hawking over the suburbs.

Richard's Pipit [*Anthus novaeseelandiae*] An occasional visitor to grassy areas on the fringes of the suburbs such as Casuarina Drive in Rapid Creek.

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike [*Coracina novaehollandiae*] This species, one of the most widespread in Australia is apparently mainly a dry season visitor to

Darwin. However, at this season it is very common in the suburbs, often perching on power-lines or even clothes-hoists. Immatures lack the full black face and throat patch and can be confused with the next species.

White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike [*Coracina papuensis*] A resident species but generally less obtrusive than the previous. Favours well-wooded suburbs; it is uncertain whether it still breeds regularly in Darwin but in 1977 it attempted to breed in Nightcliff (C. Peterson, pers. comm.) and successfully bred in the city alongside the MLC Building (D. Jacobs, pers. comm.) Breeding may generally be earlier than the December and January suggested by Storr. The MLC birds had young fledged in November. Plumages are whiter on the underparts than *C. novaehollandiae* and favours some habitats, such as rain-forest, that the other usually avoids. Although the two species may occur close together, they apparently do not mix.

White-winged Triller [*Lalage sueurii*] Quite common as a dry-season visitor when the nondescript female or non-breeding males visit suburban gardens and a variety of woodland habitats including mangroves. Recently, in 1976 and 1977, males have been frequently seen in breeding plumage and heard in full song in several suburbs and in the city itself. There was a breeding attempt in mangroves at Nightcliff in November 1977. It seems that this may



Torresian Crow

be a local change in status for a species which is common in the arid and semi-arid areas of the Territory.

Varied Triller [*Lalage leucomela*] A common resident, sometimes visiting well-wooded suburbs, especially during caterpillar plagues. Otherwise it is a fairly retiring although noisy species, most often found in mangroves or monsoon forest. Could be confused with previous species which is never barred on the underparts, lacks the buff on the under tail coverts and has different calls (refer Slater 1974 for description). Both species sometimes occur together; Varied does not have the brown nondescript plumage of the female or non-breeding male White-winged.

Green-backed Warbler [*Gerygone chloronota*] A small, inconspicuous, resident species common in monsoon-forest on the fringes of Darwin, especially in the Fannie Bay area.

Golden-headed Cisticola [*Cisticola exilis*] A common but rarely seen bird frequenting patches of undergrowth and rough grass, for instance, around Salomika, Fannie Bay and parts of Nightcliff. At the beginning of its breeding season during the humid build-up to the wet season in November-December it perches prominently and calls frequently.

Helmeted (Mangroves, Melville Is.) Friarbird [*Philemon buceroides*] Of the two Friarbird species in Darwin, this is mainly found in monsoon-forest or mangroves but is quite a common visitor to gardens adjoining these habitats in Nightcliff, Rapid Creek and Fannie Bay. The difficulties of distinguishing this species from the next are overstated; it lacks the conspicuous "hump" at the base of the bill and the white feathers on the head which characterize *P. argenticeps*. The underparts are browner and with practice, many of the calls can be separated.

Silver-crowned Friarbird [*Philemon argenticeps*] Quite common, but usually avoiding monsoon-forest and mangroves. Freely visits suburban gardens to feed on nectar-bearing flowers and breeds on the outskirts of the built-up area. Habitat overlaps somewhat with the previous species but Helmeted is unusual in the open eucalypt forest which is the principal habitat of this species.

Blue-faced Honeyeater [*Entomyzon cyanotis*] A large honeyeater which prefers open eucalypt woodland where it breeds, generally avoiding the monsoon forest remnants of Nightcliff and Fannie Bay and mangroves. Visits gardens to feed on banana flowers. Has a penetrating single whistle, an early morning call often heard in the dry season.

White-gaped Honeyeater [*Lichenostomus unicolor*] A common species but one which avoids open eucalypt woodland. As a suburban bird favours the more established gardens but freely uses exotic trees, such as poincianas and mangoes. It is also quite common in the city area where suitable trees are available but is largely absent from the newer northern suburbs.

White-throated Honeyeater [*Melithreptus albogularis*] Prior to cyclone Tracy, a common species in eucalypt woodland and its vestiges around Darwin but wind damage to its habitat and interference with re-growth from badly controlled or accidental burning has reduced it considerably, although it remains common outside the area of the most damage. It is now scarce in the Lee Point Rd. area, adjoining the Wanguri and Wulagi subdivisions where it was common formerly but still occurs in eucalypts in Nightcliff and elsewhere.

Brown Honeyeater [*Lichmera indistincta*] Common, but mainly on the fringes of the built-up area, favouring mangroves, but also visiting suburban gardens. Breeds in the dry season and is very quiet and unobtrusive at other times.

Rufous-banded Honeyeater [*Canopophila albobularis*] One of the commonest small birds in the Darwin area, apparently a mangrove species and very common in this habitat where competition with the Brown Honeyeater seems to be minimised; Rufous-Banded breeds mainly in the wet season and is relatively unobtrusive during the dry. It is a frequent visitor to suburban gardens and is quite common even in the city itself; its song can often be heard in Smith and Mitchell streets.

Red-headed Honeyeater [*Myzomela erythrocephala*] Mainly a mangrove species which sometimes visits nearby suburban gardens with suitable cover, for example, in Stuart Park and Fannie Bay.

Mistletoebird [*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*] Formerly quite common but much scarcer since Cyclone Tracy, possibly because of the destruction of its main food-source, the native mistletoes which are semi-parasitic on large trees.

Striated (Black-headed) Pardalote [*Pardalotus striatus*] A common dry season visitor and breeding species with a monotonous disyllabic call heard throughout the day, even in the heat of the afternoon when other birds are silent. Generally shuns rain and monsoon-forest, mangroves and prefers open eucalypt woodland. Nests in burrows in the ground, in dry creek-beds, deep wheel ruts, piles of top-soil dumped in gardens or heaps of builder's sand.

Yellow White-eye [*Zosterops lutea*] A mangrove species that sometimes wanders into adjoining suburban areas, for example at Stuart Park or Nightcliff.

Double-barred Finch [*Poephila bichenovii*] Fairly common in some areas, for example Parap and Fannie Bay and perhaps Ludmilla and Nightcliff but absent elsewhere. Status uncertain; may breed regularly.

Chestnut-breasted Mannikin [*Lonchura castaneothorax*] Occurs in wastelands, areas cleared but with some regrowth, cyclone-damaged or otherwise degraded scrub, near the suburbs and roosts in some numbers just east of Darwin but status uncertain and apparently no definite breeding records.

Yellow-rumped Mannikin [*Lonchura flaviprymna*] This species is in an obscure taxonomic position but is clearly related to the previous and sometimes occurs in small numbers in flocks of Chestnut-breasted.

Yellow Oriole [*Oriolus flavocinctus*] Primarily a bird of the mangroves and coastal monsoon-forest, relatively common in suburban areas adjoining these habitats, as in Nightcliff, Rapid Creek and Fannie Bay.

Olive-backed Oriole [*Oriolus sagittatus*] An erratic visitor to Darwin, mainly in dry season. Occasionally seen in gardens but care is needed to separate from the female of the much commoner Yellow Figbird.

Yellow Figbird [*Sphecotheres viridis*] Common; especially conspicuous and noisy from September onwards, at the beginning of its breeding season. Occurs in all suitable suburbs with adequate cover and breeds even in the city itself. Can be heard calling close to the Smith-Knuckey intersection or in Bennett Street near the Reserve Bank. The brightly coloured male is distinctive but the female could be confused with the Olive-backed Oriole which is slimmer, has a more slender bill and lacks the area of pink skin around the eye.

Spangled Drongo [*Dicrurus hottentottus*] Mainly a monsoon forest and mangrove bird that overfills into adjoining suburbs.

Great Bowerbird [*Chlamydera nuchalis*] Not uncommon in the Darwin area but is generally a bird of the suburban fringes, whereas in Batchelor it is common in gardens and occurs freely around road-houses on the Stuart Highway. Uses flip-tops from cans in the decoration of its bower. There are no confirmed breeding records but 'active' bowers

have been found near Holmes Jungle and Nakara in 1974. Present status uncertain.

Australian Magpie Lark (Mudlark Pee-wee) [*Grallina cyanoleuca*] A conspicuous dry season visitor and one of Australia's most widespread and familiar species. Apparently does not breed in the coastal Darwin area.

White-breasted Woodswallow [*Artamus leucorhynchus*] A common dry season visitor, often seen in small flocks on power-lines. Absent during its wet season breeding period when it seems to move eastwards into Arnhem Land.

Grey (Silver-backed) Butcherbird [*Cracticus torquatus*] Present in eucalypt woodland in the Lee Point Road area. Refer next species.

Pied Butcherbird [*Cracticus nigrogularis*] This species has probably suffered with the previous species from cyclone damage to its preferred habitat of eucalypt woodland and from the encroachment of the suburbs but it is still common just outside Darwin. Has bred in the Wanguri area (1974) and probably still does; occurs close to the new subdivisions at Wulagi and Anula. Avoids monsoon forest, mangroves and completely open habitats without trees.

Torresian Crow [*Corvus orru*] An occasional visitor to the area, especially in the dry season although it breeds in the Humpty Doo area. The comparative scarcity in Darwin is surprising as the author has seen it scavenging on the town dump at Gove and this is apparently common behaviour. (K. Grant, pers. comm.). (The two main species at Leanyer dump are Pied Heron [*Ardea picata*] and Black Kite.)

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The following have been used in the preparation of this article and are gratefully acknowledged:

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